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“THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES” AS LITERATURE FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

LOUISE MILLER
High School, Lincoln, Neb.

To the sum of adverse criticism which has been intermittently tendered the Committee of Ten on the course their composite wisdom constructed, I wish now to add my page also. Perhaps no one has yet offered objections to the use of Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* in the secondary schools; and since the cry against “feminization of the schools” has been loud and long, the present time seems most opportune for a denunciation of that concentrated dose of old-maidism.

It is not difficult to understand why the story should have been included in a list of books compiled by a committee of educators who, for the most part, are not teachers, or at any rate not teachers in the secondary schools. Hawthorne is America's greatest literary genius, the critics say, and they are no doubt right. Our young people should be taught to know and love things American; they must not fail to become acquainted with our master of letters. From his short stories, because of the delicate, dream-like indefiniteness which is their greatest charm, young readers cannot receive deep or lasting impressions. It needs a novel to make the contact of sufficient duration to enable them to realize, even in part, the gentle genius. Of Hawthorne's novels, *The Scarlet Letter* is deemed unsuitable because of the forbidden problem, *The Marble Faun* is un-American and non-moral, *The Blithedale Romance* is episodal. By such a process of elimination the Hawthorne advocate finds himself reduced to *The House of the Seven Gables*, which appears suitable, being American, mildly, vaguely so, and innocuous, surely. To the young mind it is also inane, and here lies a part of the mischief.

The book must fail of interest to a majority of high-school pupils. They want to do things and have something doing.

The meditations of a recluse must seem to them a waste of time and of no effect. In this story the meditations of one recluse are reported and enlarged upon by another. Should the pupils give themselves up to the story with the impetuosity natural to their youth, which a few pale girls and delicate boys would perhaps do, they would find themselves shut up in a musty old, silent, rotting, stifling house, waiting with bated breath for Miss Hepzibah to overcome her Pyncheon pride and open the shop door. This stupendous thing accomplished, the action of the piece is almost done. The majority of the pupils would refuse to remain so imprisoned, and while they read Hawthorne's good English, would be going on excursions to seek adventures of their own. So much better for their mental health. That Hawthorne has a delicate touch is not of great interest to them; they are not yet ready to become critics; they should instead be beginning to form a taste for good reading. If *The House of the Seven Gables* does not help to lead them into this life-enriching habit,, and I think it cannot, it fails of one of its most important functions.

Another important function of the study of literature in the secondary schools, the educators tell us, and we may well believe it, is to enlarge and ennoble the pupils' ideals of life and character. Which of the poor bloodless creatures in this book will inspire them with enthusiasm for vigorous manhood and noble womanhood? Not the scowling, hesitating, discontented Hepzibah; not poor, foolish Clifford. As portrayals of morbid nature these may have an intellectual interest for the student of psychology; as inspiration for boys and girls they can hardly be made serviceable. Hawthorne preserves this decadent race of Pyncheons from perishing utterly in the usual way, by the infusion of new, plebeian blood; but this is only in prospect, a promise for the next generation, not a tangible reality for the epoch with which he is dealing; which, without action, without living characters, cannot bring to young people large inspirations.

Adolescents are sensitive, moody, impressionable. Shall we stamp their sensitive minds with a thing so morbid? An in-

ventory of the contents of the book shows the following remarkable aggregation: (1) hanging a wizard; (2) an hereditary curse on the Pyncheon family; (3) the mysteriously dead colonel with blood-stained ruff; (4) a decaying wooden house; (5) a poisoned well; (6) a weed-choked garden; (7) degenerate chickens typifying a dying race; (8) a broken-spirited spinster; (9) an imbecile brother; (10) a mesmerist; (11) a dead judge, sitting upright, watch in hand, with blood-stained ruff. The material cannot be called cheerful or wholesome. This, in the hands of the mystical Hawthorne at a time when he says he was languid and dispirited, produced a literature which, it is said, Emerson at one time went about advising people not to read because of its depressing melancholy.

After a lapse of fifteen years, I recalled my first reading of the story with a feeling of dismal weariness. On a second reading, which was of necessity intensive, I was sensible of its depressing influence even to a greater degree. There would probably never have been a second reading had it not become my duty to fit to the eager, restless minds of a class of twenty-six adolescents, half of whom were lively boys, the subtle introspections of Hawthorne and the melancholy meditations of his decayed gentlewoman. A nice task, indeed, but what cannot a teacher with a little skill and so much authority appear to do with a reasonably docile high-school class? What she does and what she appears to do are, of course, often separate and differing quantities. I hope that what I did may result in the least possible harm. I conducted the class intact through the book, for which I claim some credit. They appeared to swallow their daily allotments with admirable submissiveness. We laughed a little with Hawthorne, sighed with Hephzibah, wondered at Clifford, resisted as well as we could the microbes of the unventilated house, and when the author, himself weary of it all, bundled his ghostly people off to the Pyncheon farm in the family carriage, to be rid of them, we emerged from the vapid atmosphere, filled our lungs with fresh air, and set out for the green fields of Raveloe, which by common consent was pronounced a better place to be.